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Blaming it on the Church : on Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes"

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Frank McCourt was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1930, and moved back to Limerick with his family when he was four. As fate would have it, he returned to the US 15 years later and has been resident there ever since. He burst on the literary scene in 1996 with the publication of his first book, *Angela's Ashes*, which was a best seller all over the world. This book sparked off a frenzy of memoir-writing among Irish writers who portrayed, in the vast majority of cases, the misery they endured during their childhood. The reaction in McCourt's native Limerick to *Angela's Ashes* was hostile for the most part, with many of his contemporaries making the point that their lives were not nearly as wretched as McCourt would have us believe.

Whatever one's feelings about the exactitude of his account, no one can deny the enjoyment readers derive from what is an excellent depiction of a Limerick childhood as seen through the eyes of a young child. The hunger, the cold, the smell of urine and excrement from the chamber pots that are emptied in the latrines in the morning, the pain of living with an alcoholic, feckless father who can never hold on to a job for more than a few weeks and then spends whatever little he earns in the pub where he rabbits on about how he had put his life on the line for Ireland in the fight against British colonial oppression, are all captured in a memorable fashion. McCourt lays out his stall in no uncertain terms in the opening lines of the book:

It was, of course, a miserable childhood; the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* is an utterly compelling read, but it does not have the detachment necessary to give a dispassionate view of a topic as emotionally charged as Catholicism in Ireland, writes **Eamon Maher**, in the last article in the series

In this series, Eamon Maher looks at one book by an author who was marked by Catholicism

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His bitterness towards the Catholic Church stems from his belief that the institution abandoned people like him and his family. It is undeniable that the McCourts were subjected to a great deal of trauma and humiliation, but to what extent that can be attributed to the church is debatable. The author mentions 'the poverty; the shiftless loquacious father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying school masters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for 800 long years' (p.1): these were, apparently, the main sources of his unhappiness.

McCourt is probably at his best when depicting black, hopeless situations, but he is also a writer with a well-developed sense of humour and he is a born story-teller. He can rail against the priests, the sodalities, the members of the Vincent de Paul who humiliate his mother when she asks for assistance, the Christian Brothers, but there are also some truly memorable moments and characters. And he is not always negative in his portrayal of religion. Like Joyce before him, he cannot help being impressed by the dramatic fire and brimstone sermons given by the Redemptorists during retreats, the warmth of the churches in comparison to the harsh cold outside, the sweet smell of incense that sparked his imagination and raised his thoughts to higher things. The primary function of religious instruction was to accentuate feelings of guilt and unworthiness.

RECEIVING FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

Religion was a constant in people's lives. Events like First Holy Communion were anticipated with great excitement. Here's how the children were taught to receive Communion:

He shows us how to stick out the tongue, receive the bit of paper, hold it a moment, draw in the tongue, fold your hands in prayer, look towards heaven, close your eyes in adoration, wait for the paper to melt in your mouth, swallow it, and thank God for the gift, the Sanctifying Grace wafting in on the odour of sanctity. (p.134)

This is a brilliant evocation of how seriously the 'trial run' was taken, the degree to which one was taught to have reverence for the host, to ensure that it didn't stick in your teeth or touch any part of your body. Irrespective of whether you were rich or poor, the sacraments were available to all: in this regard at least, there was equality. Once the ceremonies were over, and in spite of the dire warnings of the teachers, all the young people did a tour of the relatives and neighbours in search of money. Frank had the misfortune to vomit after eating the special First Communion breakfast prepared by his grandmother: "*Thrun up his First Communion breakfast. Thrun up the body and blood of Jesus. I have God in me backyard. What am I goin' to do? I'll take him to the Jesuits for they know the sins of the Pope himself.*" (p.143)

So Frank is duly marched off to confess his sin to an amused Jesuit, who informs him that his grandmother should wash God away with water. When the young boy is sent back in to enquire whether she should use holy water or ordinary water, the Jesuit is less amenable in his response! All the dealings with the church authorities are not as pleasant as this, however. There is great hurt, for example, when Frank is refused permission to train as an altar boy. His mother has no doubts as to why he has been rejected:

"They don't want boys from the lanes on the altar. They don't want the ones with scabby knees and hair sticking up. Oh no, they want the nice boys with hair oil and new shoes that have fathers with suits and ties and steady jobs. That's what it is and 'tis hard to hold on to the Faith with the snobbery that's in it. (p.167)

Another blow comes when he is not granted admission to the Christian Brothers' secondary, in spite of having an excellent reference from his teacher in Leamy's Primary School. (This strikes me as strange, because the commitment of the Christian Brothers to providing education for all classes in Irish society is well-known.) The mother comments on how this is the second time that the church has slammed the door in her child's face. Angela's attitude to religion is somewhat ambivalent: at times she possesses the resignation and piety that characterised many Irish women in the 1940s and 50s. But then there are examples of her rebelling against the accepted norms. Like when her husband suggests that it is her duty as a Catholic to submit to his sexual needs:

"As long as there are no more children eternal damnation sounds attractive enough to me." (p.246)

This is a spirited reaction from a woman whose suffering has been constant throughout the book: she has had to endure the death of three of her children, total neglect by her husband, humiliation at the hands of certain members of the Vincent de Paul, moral bankruptcy when she shares a bed with Laman, to whose house the family is forced to flee after the father absconds to England and fails to send any money home. Frank, while recognising her predicament, feels great resentment towards her when he realises that she and Laman are 'at the excitement' (p.340) in the loft above where he sleeps. In fact, there is anger directed in almost equal measure at the father for being useless and irresponsible, the mother for the moral compromises she makes and the Catholic Church for abdicating its responsibility to the poor. But what about the State? Why does he not take issue with them? After all, the politicians have the ultimate responsibility for the well-being of the citizens of the country. Nevertheless, they escape condemnation.

COMMON THREAD

Reproach is a common thread running through the book. Mrs Spillane, an elderly woman to whom Frank delivers telegrams, sums up the view of many when she says:

There they are, the priests and nuns telling us Jesus was poor and 'tis no shame, lorries driving up to their houses with crates and barrels of whiskey and wine, eggs galore and legs of ham and they telling us what we should give up for Lent. Lent, my arse. What are we to give up when we have Lent all year long? (pp.371-2)

One wonders how objective an assessment this is, but it serves to underline a point I wish to make in this article, namely that Frank McCourt has a relatively clichéd view of Ireland, one that has long been to the fore in relation to the decades he describes, a time, he would argue, when Ireland was an intellectual backwater, a depressing, priest-dominated, nostalgic country which constantly looked back in anger at the pain inflicted on it by the English, and blindly submitted to the dictates of the Catholic Church.

Part of the massive appeal of *Angela's Ashes* lies in its capacity to strike a chord with people who believe that we have a dismal, guilt-ridden past in Ireland which has only recently been eradicated with the emergence of a wealthy, liberal society whose inhabitants have finally been emancipated and made happy. Unfortunately, this is not the full picture. The relative collapse in Catholic practice here in the past few decades has not been replaced by any viable spiritual alternative. Let us remember also that the Church was responsible for a lot of good, something that many commentators, including

McCourt, seem to conveniently forget. Notions of right and wrong, honesty and charity in our dealings with others, neighbourliness, a sense of mystery, are but distant memories from a faraway past. Many things have improved, it is true, but there are many examples of where we have regressed also.

Angela's Ashes is a cathartic book, one that allowed its author to give vent to much of the spleen that he associated with his Irish upbringing. The Catholic Church was an integral part of his youth and, as such, McCourt may be justified in portraying it in a negative light. All that I ask for is the type of balance we encounter in the following lines:

The priests of Limerick have no patience with the likes of me. I go to confession and they hiss that I'm not in a proper spirit of repentance, that if I were I'd give up this heinous sin (masturbation). I go from church to church looking for an easy priest till Paddy Clohessy tells me there's one in the Dominican church who's ninety year old and deaf as a turnip. Every few weeks the old priest hears my confession and mumbles that I should pray for him. (p.341)

No writer should ever adopt a black and white approach, especially when looking back with the benefit of hindsight at events that took place 60 years ago. *Angela's Ashes* gets it right on a number of issues and it is an utterly compelling read, but it does not have the detachment necessary to give a dispassionate view of a topic as emotionally charged as Catholicism is in Ireland. **R**

Angela's Ashes (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 1. All references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets